

Marcus Wicker. *Maybe the Saddest Thing*. New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012. \$13.99 paper (ISBN 978-0-06-219101-4), 79 pages.

*Reviewed by Kien Lam*

Once you've heard it echo through your spine a few times, you can tell a coyote's howl from a dog's: you say *That's no dog. That's the sound of hunger*. Reading Marcus Wicker's debut collection, *Maybe the Saddest Thing*, you remember that poetry began as an oral tradition, that the best poems dance. They sing. They think. Think "ants whistling inside cracks. Because they must."

This book begins with the likes of Flavor Flav and Bruce Lee on the cover, and its pages embrace pop culture. You read this and expect to hear Ryan Seacrest quoting it on the radio. Wicker steep himself in the world and lets it all simmer around him, noting every detail: its every shade and its every smell. He knows that living is an exciting challenge that we face every single day, no matter how famous we are. Fittingly, in his poem "Love Letter to Flavor Flav" (part of a series of epistles), he quotes Bruce Lee in thinking of beauty: "*To express myself honestly enough; that, my friend, is very hard to do.* / Those are Bruce Lee's words." The poet is keenly aware of his place in the poem and the world throughout the collection. He asks Flavor Flav, "What have you become? / How you've lived saying nothing / save the same words each day / is a kind of freedom or beauty. / Please, tell me I'm not lying to us." Wicker takes the reader through his conversation with a poet, a hip-hop artist, a martial arts master, and the self. His poems remind us that everybody, even Flavor Flav, has a part in this world—that we are all subject to the hip and the hop, to heartbreak and death.

Wicker also draws from his own story to create those moments of clarity with the world. In "About the Time Two Ducks Advised Me on Matters of Flesh," the poem captures an erotic moment with the speaker's wife, Jill, in which he carefully examines a moment on a gym bicycle. He transitions from a playful laugh to his own sweating thigh into "tripping over bottled water lining her cupboard" before arriving at two ducks bouncing on each other's rumps. Then the poem speeds to the end, as if the speaker was pumping his legs on the bicycle:

The rain turns, beats harder on the gym roof. The drake's wide orange bill begins to nip at the woman's head. Lightning welts the sky and he's pecking. Jill's high-stepping something awful. Thunder shakes the window. Someone's knocking wildly at someone's skull. I stop.

This moment of heightened sexual tension captures the essence of the book: a humorous situation involving a sweaty couple and a couple of ducks is just a front for something deeper. In this case, it captures eroticism and violence, the nature of flesh, and the arresting power of desire.

When hearing or reading lines like a "host of holy ghosts / in any B-boy with a pulse" or "you / cocking back that cold, hard Glock / against Samuel L. Jackson's dick," our ears feel like they can see the words shimmy across the page. The poetry dances around potential pitfalls of writing about culture (go ahead, check the Yahoo front page)—be it mundane details, clichés, or being unable to relate it to an audience—by captivating us with humor and a precision which brings the

furthest reaches of celebrity adulation to earth. Such is the case in “Love Letter to RuPaul” which, yes, opens with a bit of a dick joke:

You have one of the longest,  
thickest, most veined, colossal  
set of hands that I have ever seen  
and, frankly, they have cast a spell on me.

Well, perhaps it’s a hand joke. The spell it cast on me was a fit of laughs, setting me up for an emotional roller coaster by lulling me to the top before forcing me to plummet to the end with “How / raw you must be. To sit before a camera, / legs uncrossed.” It’s moments like this which forces the reader to stop and consider another human’s emotional fortitude that allow us to marvel in each other and in ourselves. This pop culture we live in asks not just celebrities, but all of us to bare more than ever before.

Wicker’s book covers a wide spectrum of themes through its explorations of personal history and pop culture. Death, love, race, and violence: it is all accounted for, and the poet accepts that “not every moment / needs naming. I know precisely what to call this.” He says, “to write race is to stare firm,” that it’s difficult. Death is difficult, and its shadow “blasting / everything blue—the same” is “Maybe the Saddest Thing.” He says that it’s all okay, because “the world would keep on grinding on without them. / Someone should tell this to us who die early.” There is a rhythm to life, and Wicker’s book doesn’t skip a beat. Put it in a book-bag and put away the Old Spice. Put it on a shelf and watch the other books jiggle.